



United States Mission to the OSCE

Reply to Head of OSCE Office in Belarus

As delivered by Political Counselor Bruce Connuck
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
November 11, 2004

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States also warmly welcomes Ambassador Heyken to the Permanent Council.

We thank him for his factual and forthright report to this body. We have also found his spot reporting on troubling developments in Belarus in recent months most useful.

The United States appreciates the perseverance of the OSCE Office in Minsk in pursuing all aspects of its mandate under difficult circumstances.

As he describes in his report, we support Ambassador Heyken's efforts to reach out to Belarusian officials both to establish productive working relations and to bring developments of concern to their attention.

It is, however, in Belarus' own self-interest to facilitate the OSCE Office's institution-building and economic and environmental activities, rather than hindering or delaying them..

The United States, for example, cannot understand Belarus' continuing delay in giving final approval for the printing of the textbook on human rights intended for use in secondary schools.

At a more fundamental level, Belarus is sabotaging Ambassador Heyken's mandate to assist it in developing relations with civil society. It is doing so through its continuing assault on non-governmental organizations espousing human rights and democracy, independent media, democratic political parties and independent trade unions.

We welcome Ambassador Heyken's confirmation that the Belarusian Justice Ministry has withdrawn its application to the Supreme Court to close the Belarus Helsinki Committee. As we have on previous occasions, we call on Belarus to desist from its politically-motivated persecution of this NGO.

This small positive step, however, is vastly overshadowed by the unceasing violations of OSCE commitments perpetrated by Belarusian authorities since Ambassador Heyken appeared before the Permanent Council in July 2004.

The campaign and October 17th voting for parliamentary elections and the referendum eliminating term limits on the presidency fell significantly short of international standards for democratic elections. The detention and abuse of peaceful demonstrators, opposition leaders

and foreign journalists, including those from ORT, RenTV, NTV and the Associated Press, directly flouts OSCE commitments and values.

In recent days the U.S.-supported private voluntary organization Counterpart International was forced to close because the Belarusian Government refused to renew its registration.

The imprisonment of former Foreign Economic Relations Minister Michael Marinich was also recently extended, despite the fact that law enforcement has failed to mount a credible case against him since he was arrested in April 2004.

We call on the Government of Belarus to grant Ambassador Heyken's repeated requests for access to Mr. Marinich.

In light of its unrelenting pressure on civil society, the Belarusian Government gives the OSCE Office no choice but to monitor, on a sustained basis, public demonstrations and court proceedings in Belarus.

We commend Ambassador Heyken and his team for demonstrating the deep concern of the international community with their activities in this regard.

Ambassador Heyken, thank you once again for your report and please share our appreciation with the staff of the OSCE Office in Minsk.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.